

AUTHOR OF "The Leavenworth Case,"

AGATHA WEBB.

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN.

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

Just after a ball at the Sutherland mansion Agatha Webb and her servant, a young girl named Polly, were discovered in a room which for years has been growing dimly lit. A trace of blood on the floor points to him as the murderer. Mr. Sutherland and the local marshal, Fenlon, investigate. Agatha is known to but few as a rich woman. The key to her money drawer is in the hands of her husband, Miss Page, the niece of Sutherland's housekeeper, persists in remaining about the Webb mansion and discovers the blood on the grass. The money drawer is found to be empty and robbery is added to the mystery. Frederick Sutherland, a young man, calls his father to witness his determination to marry Miss Page, by whom he has been fascinated. Miss Page tells Frederick that she will give him the key to the money drawer if he will marry her. Frederick follows, anxious and bewildered, and soon had the doubtful pleasure of seeing his father enter his study in company with the four men considered to be most interested in the elucidation of the Webb's mystery.

As he was lingering in an undecided mood in the small passageway leading upstairs he felt the pressure of a finger on his shoulder. Looking up, he met the eyes of Amabel, who was leaning toward him over the banisters. She was smiling, and though her face was not without evidences of physical languor, there was a charm about her person which would have been sufficient to attract him, had he not been so long before, but which now caused him such a physical repulsion that he started back in the effort to rid his shoulder from her disturbing touch.

She frowned. It was an instantaneous expression of displeasure, as she demanded: "Is my touch so burdensome?"

"If the pressure of one finger is unbearable to your sensitive nerves, how will you relish the weight of my whole hand?"

There was a fierceness in her tone, a purpose in her look that for the first time in his struggle with her revealed the full depth of her dark nature. Shivering from her appalled, he put up his hand in protest, but she brushed it away with a twinkling smile and with a cautious retreat toward the room into which Mr. Sutherland and his friends had disappeared, she whispered significantly:

"We may not have another chance to confer together. Understand, then, that it will not be necessary for you to tell me, in so many words, that you are ready to link your fortunes to mine; the taking off of your ring and your slow putting it on again, in my presence, will be understood by me as taken that you have reconsidered your present attitude and desire my silence and myself."

Frederick could not repress a shudder.

For an instant he was tempted to scud upon the spot and have the long agony over. Then the thought of the woman rose to such a pitch that he uttered an exclamation, and turning away from her face which was rapidly growing loathsome to him, he ran out of the passageway into the garden, seeing as he ran a persistent vision of himself pulling off the ring and putting it back again, under the spell of a look he rebelled against even while he yielded to its influence.

"I will not wear a ring. I will not subject myself to the possibility of obeying her behest under a sudden stress of fear or fascination," he exclaimed, pausing by the well curb and looking over it at his reflection in the water beneath. "If I drop it here I at least lose the horror of the deed, and I have not the will to do so."

Frederick made a dash for the door, but he was stopped by a woman's hand. "You are not to go," she said. "You are to stay here until you have seen me."

Frederick staggered away. He had never in his life been so near mental and physical collapse. At the threshold of the sitting room door he met his father. Mr. Sutherland was looking both troubled and anxious; more so, Frederick thought, than when he signed the check for him on the previous night. As their eyes met, Frederick's embarrassment, but Frederick, whose nerves had been highly strung up by what he had just heard, soon controlled himself, and surveying his father with forced calmness, began:

"This is dreadful news, sir."

But his father, intent on his own thoughts, hurriedly interrupted him.

"You told me yesterday that everything was broken off between you and Miss Page. Yet I saw you re-enter the house together last night a little while after I gave you the money you asked for."

"I know, and it must have had a bad appearance. I entreat you, however, to believe that this meeting between Miss Page and myself was against my wish and that the relations between us have not been affected by anything that passed between us."

"I am glad to hear it, my son. You could not do worse by yourself than to return to your old devotion."

"I agree with you, sir. And then, because he could not help it, Frederick inquired if he had heard the news."

Mr. Sutherland, evidently startled, asked what news, to which Frederick replied:

"The news about the Zabels. They are both dead, sir, dead from hunger. Can you imagine it?"

This was something so different from what his father had expected to hear that he did not take it in at first. When he did his surprise and grief were even greater than Frederick had anticipated. Seeing him so affected, Frederick could hardly bear the whole truth would be harder to bear than the half, added the suspicion which had been attached to the younger one's name, and then stood back, scarcely daring to be a witness to the outraged feelings which such a communication could not fail to awaken in one of his father's temperament.

But though he thus escaped the shocked look which crossed his father's countenance, he could not fail to hear the indignant exclamation which burst from his lips, nor help perceiving that it would take more than the most complete circumstantial evidence to convince his father of the guilt of men he had known and respected for so many years.

For some reason Frederick experienced great relief at this, and was bracing himself to meet the fire of questions which his statement must necessarily call forth, when the sound of approaching steps drew the at-

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CHAPTER XVIII.

Frederick rose early. He had slept but little. The words he had overheard at the end of the lot the night before were still ringing in his ears. Going down the back stairs, in his anxiety to avoid Amabel, he came upon one of the stable men.

"Heen to the village this morning?" he asked.

"No, sir; but Lem has. There's great news there. I wonder if any one has told Mr. Sutherland."

"What news, Jake? I don't think my father is up yet."

"Why, sir, there were two more deaths in town last night—the brothers Zabel, and folks do say Lem heard it a dozen times that was one of those old men who killed Mr. Webb. The dagger was found in their house, and most of the money. Why, sir, the matter is up to you sicker."

Frederick made a start and stood upright. He had nearly fallen.

"No; that is, I am not quite myself. So many horrors, Jake. What did they die of? You say they are both dead, both?"

"Yes, sir, and it's dreadful to think of, but it was hunger, sir. Bread came too late. Both men are mere skeletons to look at. They have kept themselves close for weeks now, and nobody knew how bad off they were. I don't wonder it upset you, sir. We all feel it a bit, and I just dread to tell Mr. Sutherland."

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For some reason Frederick experienced great relief at this, and was bracing himself to meet the fire of questions which his statement must necessarily call forth, when the sound of approaching steps drew the at-

gentleman himself. "I wore this orchid in my hair that night, and there would be nothing strange in its being afterward picked up in Mrs. Webb's house, because I was in that house at or near the time she was murdered."

"You in that house?"

"Yes, as far as the ground floor, no further. Here the little finger stopped pointing. 'I am ready to tell you about it, sir, and only regret I have delayed doing so so long, but I wished to be sure it was necessary. Your presence here and your first question show that it is.'

There was suavity in her tone now, not unminged with candor. Sweetwater did not seem to relish this, for he moved uneasily on his feet and lost a shade of his self-satisfied attitude. He had still to be made acquainted with all the ins and outs of this woman's remarkable nature.

"We are waiting," suggested Dr. Talbot. She turned to face this new speaker, and Frederick was relieved from the sight of her tantalizing smile.

"I will tell my story simply," said she, "with the simple suggestion that you believe me; otherwise I am sure that I should have been able to convince you of my truthfulness. I was listening to them, but I did not take in much of what they were saying till I heard behind me an irascible voice exclaiming: 'You laugh, do you? I wonder if you would laugh so easily if you knew that these two poor old men haven't had a decent meal in a fortnight! I didn't know the speaker, but I was thrilled by his words. Not had a good meal, these men, for a fortnight! I felt as if personally guilty of their sufferings, and, happening to raise my eyes at that moment, I saw the two men sitting at the banquet refreshments prepared for us all in the supper room, I felt guiltier than ever. Suddenly I took a resolution. It was a queer one, and may serve to show you some of the oddities of my nature. Though I was engaged for the next dance, and though I was dressed in the flimsy garments suitable to the occasion, I decided to leave the ball and carry some sandwiches down to these old men. Procuring a bit of paper, I made up a bundle and stole out of the house without being seen. I was anxious to see the intention. Not wishing to be seen, I went out by the garden door, which is at the end of a dark hall."

"Just as the band was playing the 'Harebell mazurka,'" interpolated Sweetwater.

Started for the first time from her careless composure by an interruption of which it was impossible for her at that minute to measure either the motive or the meaning, she ceased to play with her fingers on the balustrade and let her eyes rest for a moment on the man who had thus spoken, as if she hesitated between her desire to annihilate him for his impertinence and a fear of the cold hate she saw awakening in his eyes. "How came you to have the handling of the money taken from Agatha Webb's private drawer?"

"I ran down the hill recklessly. I was bent on my errand and not at all afraid of the dark. When I reached that part of the road where the bushes were thick, I heard footsteps in my rear. I had over-taken some one. Flanking my pace, so that I should not pass this person, whom I instinctively knew to be a man, I followed him till I came to a high board fence. It was that surrounding Agatha Webb's house, and when I saw it I could not help connecting the rather stealthy gait of the man in front of me with a story I had lately heard of the large sum of money she was known to keep in her private drawer. I was before or after this person disappeared round the corner I cannot say, but no sooner had I become certain he was bent upon entering this house than my impulse to follow him became greater. I went directly to the Zabels, I hurried down High Street just in time to see the man enter Mrs. Webb's front gateway."

"It was a late hour for visiting, but as the house had lights in both its lower and upper stories, I should by good rights have taken it for granted that he was an expected guest and gone my own way to the Zabels. But I did not. The softness with which he passed the night, and the shuffling way in which he hesitated at the front gate aroused my worst fears, and after he had opened that gate and said in a low, suppressed voice that he was there for good that I stepped inside the gate myself and took my stand in the deep shadow cast by the old pear tree on the right-hand side of the walk. Did any one speak?"

There was a unanimous denial from the five gentlemen before her, yet she did not look satisfied.

"I thought I heard some one make a remark," she said, and paused again for a

half minute, during which her smile was a study. If it was so cold and in such startling contrast to the vivid glances she threw everywhere except behind her on the landlady, it was Frederick's steady listening to her every word.

"We are very much interested," remarked Mr. Courtney. "Pray, go on."

Drawing her left hand from the balustrade where it had rested, she looked at one of her fingers with an odd backward gesture.

"I will," she said, and her tone was hard and threatening. "Five minutes, no longer, passed, when I was startled by a loud and terrible cry from the house, and looking up at the second story window, from which the sound proceeded, I saw a woman's figure standing out in a seemingly powerless condition. Too terrified to move, I clung trembling to the tree, hearing and not hearing the shouts and laughter of a dozen or more men, who at that minute passed by the corner on their way to the wharves. I was dazed, I was choking, and only came to myself, when, sooner or later, I do not know how soon or how late, a fresh horror happened. The woman whom I had just seen fall almost from the window was a serving woman, but when I heard another scream I knew that the mistress of the house was being attacked, and riveting my eyes on these windows, I beheld the shade of one of them thrown back and a hand appearing, flung out something which fell in the grass on the opposite side of the lawn. Then the shade fell again, and hearing nothing further, I ran to where the object had fallen, and feeling for it, I found it was a ring. Horrified beyond all expression, I dropped the weapon and drew back, trembling, into my former place of concealment."

"But I was not satisfied to remain there. A curiosity, a determination even, to see the man who had committed this dastardly deed, attacked me with such force that I was induced to leave my hiding place and even to enter the house where in all probability he was counting the gains he had just obtained at the price of such precious blood. The door, which he had not perfectly closed behind him, seemed to invite me in, and before I had realized my own temerity I was standing in the hall of this ill-fated house."

The interest, which up to this moment had been breathless, now expressed itself in hurried ejaculations and broken words, and Mr. Sutherland, who had listened like one in a dream, exclaimed eagerly, and in a tone which proved that he for the moment, at least, believed this more than improbable tale.

"You can tell us if Philomen was in the little room at the moment when you entered the house?"

As every one there present realized the importance of this question, a general movement took place and each and all drew nearer as she met their eyes and answered pleadingly:

"Yes; Mr. Webb was sitting in a chair asleep. He was the only person I saw."

"Oh, I know he never committed this crime," gasped his old friend, in a relief so great that he and all seemed to share it.

"New I have heard for the rest. Go on, Miss Page."

But Miss Page paused again to look at her finger, and give that sideways look to her husband which she had never before shown to any one who did not know of the compact between herself and the listening man below.

"I hate to go back to that moment," said she, "for when I saw the candles burning on the table, and the husband of the woman above sitting there in unconscious apathy, I felt something rise in my throat that made me deadly sick for a moment. Then I went right in where he was, and was about to shake his arm and wake him when I detected a spot of blood on my finger from the dagger I had handled. That gave me another turn, and led me to wipe off my finger on his sleeve."

"It's a pity you did not wipe off your slippers, too," murmured Sweetwater.

Again she looked at him, again her eyes opened in terror upon the face of this man, now so plain and insignificant in her eyes, but now so filled with menace she inwardly quaked before it, for all her apparent scorn.

"Slippers," she murmured. "Did not your feet pass through the blood in the grass, as well as your hands?"

She did not answer. She held him, possibly, in too much scorn for the blood on my hand," she said, not looking at him, but at Mr. Courtney. "If there is any on my slippers it can be accounted for in the same way." And she rapidly renewed her narrative. "I had no sooner made my little finger clean—I never thought of any one suspecting the old gentleman—when I heard steps on the stairs and knew that the murderer was coming down, and in another

instant would pass the open door before which I stood.

"Though I had been courageous enough up to that minute, I was seized by a sudden panic at the prospect of meeting face to face one whose hands were perhaps dripping with the blood of his victim. To confront him there and then might mean death to me and I did not want to die but to live, for I am young, sir, and not without a prospect of happiness before me. So I sprang back, and seeing no other place of concealment, I ran to the room where I had crouched down in the shadow of the man you call Philomen. For one, two minutes, I knelt there in a state of mortal terror, while the feet descended, paused, started to enter the room where I was, hesitated, turned and finally left the house."

"Miss Page, wait, wait," put in the coroner. "You saw him; you can tell who this man was?"

The eagerness of his appeal seemed to excite her. A light color appeared in her cheeks and she took a step forward, but before she could speak she gave a start and drew back with an ejaculation which left a more or less sinister echo in the ears of all who heard it.

Frederick had just shown himself at the top of the staircase.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said he, advancing into their midst with an air whose unexpected manliness disguised his inward agitation. "The few words I have just heard Miss Page say are of so important a nature I find it impossible not to join you."

Amabel, upon whose lips a faint complacent smile had appeared as she stepped by her, glanced up at these words in secret astonishment at the indifference they showed, and then dropped her eyes to his hands with an intent gaze which seemed to affect him unpleasantly, for he thrust them immediately behind him, though he did not lower his head or lose his air of determination.

"In my presence here undesirable," he inquired, with a glance toward his father. Sweetwater looked as if he thought it, but he did not presume to say anything, and the others being too interested in the developments of Miss Page's story to waste any time on lesser matters, Frederick remained, greatly to Miss Page's evident satisfaction.

"Did you see this man's face?" Mr. Courtney now broke in, in urgent inquiry.

Her answer came slowly, after another long look in Frederick's direction.

"No, I did not dare to make the effort. I was obliged to crouch too close to the floor. I simply heard his footsteps."

"See, now!" muttered Sweetwater, but he said no more. "She condemns herself. There isn't a woman living who would fall to look up under these circumstances even at the risk of her life."

Knapp seemed to agree with him, but Mr. Courtney, following his own idea, pressed his former question, saying:

"Was it an old man's step?"

"It was not an agile one."

"And you did not catch the least glimpse of the man's face or figure?"

"Not a glimpse."

"So you are in no position to identify him?"

"If by any chance I should hear those same footsteps coming down a flight of stairs I think I should be able to recognize them," she gloomed, in the sweetest tones at her command.

"She knows it is too late for her to hear those of the two dead Zabels," growled the man from Boston.

"We are no nearer the solution of this mystery than we were in the beginning," said Mr. Courtney.

"Gentlemen, I have not yet finished my story," Amabel sweetly intimated. "Perhaps what I have yet to tell may give you some clue as to who this man was."

"Ah, yes; go on, go on. You have not yet explained how you came to be in possession of Agatha's money."

"Just so," she answered, with another quick look at Frederick, the last she gave him for some time. "As soon, then, as I dared, I ran out of the house into the yard. The moon, which had been under a cloud, was now shining brightly, and by its light I saw that the space before me was empty and that I might venture to enter the street. But before doing so, I looked about for the dagger I had thrown from me before going in, but I could not find it. It had been picked up by the fugitive and carried away. Annoyed at the cowardice which had led me to lose such a valuable piece of evidence through a purely womanish whim, I was about to leave the yard when my eyes fell on the little bundle of sandwiches, which I had brought down from the bill and which I had left under the pear tree at the first scream I had heard from the house. It had burst open and two or three of the sandwiches lay broken on the ground. But those that were intact I picked up, and, being more than ever anxious to cover up by some

ostensible errand my absence from the party, I rushed away toward the lonely road where these brothers lived, meaning to leave such fragments as remained on the old doorstep, beyond which I had been told such suffering existed.

"It was now late, very late, for a girl like myself to be out, but, under the excitement of what I had just seen and heard, I became oblivious to fear, and rushed into those light. Perhaps the shouts and stray sounds of laughter that came up from the wharves where a ship was getting under way gave me a certain sense of companionship. Perhaps—it is it is for me to dilate upon my feelings—it is my errand you are interested in and what happened when I came up to the Zabels' dreary dwelling."

The look with which she paused, ostensibly to take breath, but in reality to weigh and criticize the looks of those about her, was one of those wholly indescribable ones with which she was accustomed to control the judgment of men who allowed themselves to watch too closely the ever-changing expression of her weird yet charming face. But it fell upon men steeled against her fascinations, and realizing her inability to move them, she proceeded with her story before even the most anxious of her hearers could request her to do so.

"I had come," she said, "very quietly along the road, for my feet were lightly shod, and the moonlight was too bright for me to be hindered in my secret. I cleared the trees and came into the open place where the house stands. I stumbled with surprise at seeing a figure crouching on the doorstep I had anticipated finding as empty as the road. It was an old man's figure, and as I paused in my secret awe, I saw slowly and with great feebleness raise to his feet and began to grope about for the door. As he did so I heard a sharp tinkling sound, as of something metallic falling on the doorstep, and, taking a quick step forward, I looked over his shoulder and saw in the moonlight at his feet a dagger so like the one I had lately handled in Mrs. Webb's yard that I was overwhelmed with astonishment, and surveyed the need and feeble form of the man who had dropped it with a sensation difficult to describe. The next moment he was stooping for the weapon, with a startled air that had impressed itself distinctly upon my memory, and when, after many feeble attempts, he succeeded in grasping it, he vanished into the house so suddenly that I could not be sure whether he had seen me standing there or not.

"All this was more than surprising to me, for I had never thought of associating an old man with this crime. Indeed, I was so astonished to find him in possession of this weapon that I forgot all about my errand and only wondered how I could see and know more. Fearing to be observed where I was, I hid in amongst the bushes and soon found myself under one of the windows. The shade was down and I was about to push it aside when I heard some one moving about inside and stopped. But I could not resist my curiosity, so pulling a hairpin from my hair I worked a little hole in the shade and through this I looked into a room brightly illumined by the moon which shone through an adjoining window. And what did I see there? Her eyes turned to Frederick. His right hand had stolen toward his left, but it passed under her look and remained motionless. "Only an old man sitting at a table and—" Why did she pause, and why did she cover up that pause with a consequential sort of cough? Perhaps Frederick could have told. Frederick, who had had now fallen at his side, but Frederick volunteered nothing, and no one, not even Sweetwater, guessed all that lay beyond that and which was left hovering in the air to be finished—when? Alas! had she not set the day and the hour.

(To be Continued.)

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